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Review of *Prairie Republic: The Political Culture of Dakota Territory, 1879-1889* by Jon K. Lauck

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Prairie Republic: The Political Culture of Dakota Territory, 1879–1889. By Jon K. Lauck. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2010. xx + 281 pp. Maps, photographs, notes, index. \$32.95.

The Dakotas are often an overlooked and under-examined part of the United States. No one seems to know whether the region is part of the Midwest or the “Real West,” and so it often falls between the historiographical cracks. In this excellent study, Jon Lauck examines the political culture of the eastern region of South Dakota in the last decade before statehood. This period has been neglected by recent scholars, in part because it was often assumed that the standard work, Howard Lamar’s *Dakota Territory, 1861–1889: A Study of Frontier Politics*, published in 1956, had said the last word on the sub-

ject. But Lauck, while recognizing the strengths and contributions of Lamar’s study, also notes that, like all history, it was influenced by the preconceptions and the reigning historical orthodoxy of the era in which it was written and thus may merit reexamination more than a half-century later.

In his interpretive approach, Lauck takes issue not only with Lamar’s emphasis on political corruption, but also with the largely negative assessment of this region and era from both the Progressive-era historians and, more recently, the New Western Historians. Lauck gives a thorough, and often critical, survey of the major historiographical trends on virtually every subtopic he covers in this study. In general, his book reflects a broad reading of the most important secondary literature in the field, but is also built upon extensive archival study in primary sources such as the letters and diaries of pioneer settlers, local newspapers, and the publications of the territorial government.

Lauck clearly states that the study is limited to the decade before statehood. That makes a significant, well-defined period to examine, and I agree with his contention that this is an understudied period. But the reader must remember how narrow a slice of time this is. Some of the optimistic feel of the era disappeared later as bad weather hit the region and farmers came to resent the monopolistic practices of the railroads and grain marketers. As the era of modern, mechanized agribusiness took hold, some of those small-scale farms that were typical of the territorial era were too small to survive, and those that couldn’t afford to expand faced a great disillusionment about the pioneering efforts they had expended in the Dakotas.

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